



Forest School and Outdoor Learning in the Early Years

2nd Edition

Sara Knight



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Case studies

This is an indication of where you will find case studies in the book relevant to particular age ranges:

CHAPTER	CASE STUDY (i.e. the topic or title)	AGE RANGE
1	A Visit To Denmark	10 months to 6 years
1	The Bishop's Wood Centre	All ages from toddler to adult trainees
2	A Wood On Site	3 to 5 years
2	A Wood Within Walking Distance	4 to 8 years
2	A Wood That's A Short Minibus Ride Away	3 to 5 years
2	A Special Place To Go	2 to 5 years
8	Dilham Preschool, Norfolk	2 to 4 years
8	Lings Wood, Northamptonshire	Toddler to 5 years plus parents
8	Kenninghall Primary School, Norfolk	4 to 11 years
8	Essex Wildlife Trust	11 to 18 years
8	Green Light Trust Project, Suffolk	11 to 18 years
8	Norfolk Broads Authority	14 to 19 years
8	SEEVIC College, Essex	Students with moderate learning difficulties

A faded background image showing the lower legs and feet of a child wearing dark, muddy boots. The child is standing in a field of tall grass or reeds, with mud visible on the boots and the surrounding ground.

About the author

Sara Knight is a Principal Lecturer in early years, education and playwork at Anglia Ruskin University's Chelmsford and Cambridge Campuses. Originally a nursery teacher running a 52-place nursery class, Sara then worked in a special school before moving into the further education (FE) and higher education (HE) sectors. Alongside this, she has been working with the environmental charity the Green Light Trust in Suffolk, running her own Forest School sessions and involved with training in Forest School provision. Sara has written for *Nursery World* and *Child Education* magazines, as well as publishing fiction, both short stories and poetry. Her other SAGE books are *Risk and Adventure in Early Years Outdoor Play* (2011) and *Forest School for All* (2011).

A faded, grayscale photograph of a child's legs in dark, muddy boots stepping into a puddle, creating a splash. The child is wearing light-colored shorts. The background is a soft-focus field of grass or reeds.

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My grateful thanks are due to the staff, pupils and parents at Nayland School for their unswerving enthusiasm for Forest School and their assistance in the writing of this book. I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues at the Green Light Trust, at Anglia Ruskin University and at the Colchester Institute, whose encouragement has helped me at every step. Thanks also to the different organisations who have allowed me to refer to their Forest School work in this book: Bishop's Wood Environmental Centre, Bridgwater College, Burthworthy Outdoor Centre, Dilham Preschool, Essex Wildlife Trust, the head teachers and staff of John Bunyan Infants School, Kenninghall Primary School and Lawshall Primary School, Lings Wood Nature Reserve, Norfolk Broads Authority, Norfolk County Council Department of Environmental and Outdoor Learning and SEEVIC College. Last, but by no means least, thanks to my husband David for his patience and his critical eye. David died in 2012, and I miss him every day. I dedicate this second edition to his memory.

Key for icons

Chapter objectives



Case study



Points for discussion



Further reading



Photocopiable



1

Contextualising Forest School

Chapter objectives

- To set the historical context for the development of Forest School in the UK.
- To describe how Forest School started in the UK.
- To contrast the UK setting with an example from Denmark.
- To describe the early development of the Forest School idea in the UK.
- To look towards the future development of Forest School in the UK.



Introduction

This book is for everyone who has heard or seen the expression Forest School and thought ‘What is that?’ It is also for practitioners who have been on, or are going on, Forest School training courses and want some contextualisation. In addition, it is an attempt to satisfy the curiosity of students and others who are on teaching and childcare courses and have heard about Forest School, and who wish to explore an innovative and exciting way of working outdoors. It is for

all who are interested in or are engaged with Forest School, including workers in nurseries and schools, workers in wildlife trusts and ranger services, and students studying for qualifications in these diverse areas. It is more than just an overview, but it is not intended to replace the training process; hands-on experience in the outdoor environment is the only way to acquire a deeper understanding of what it means to be at Forest School.

I have focused on Forest School with children in the Foundation Stage (0–5 years) principally because that is where most of my experience has been, but also because I believe that Forest School can provide a particularly appropriate experience for children in their early years. I have also described some of the interesting work that other Forest School practitioners are carrying out with other groups in *Forest School for All* (Knight, 2011a). Where possible I have used real examples of how Forest School is being put into practice.

Forest School is a way of facilitating learning outdoors, the ethos of which I shall explore in Chapter 2. It is about being in a special place for a minimum of half a day per week and for at least 10 weeks. It resonates with those of us who spent our childhoods either in woods and fields or around an area of streets, messing about with mud and sticks and learning without noticing. Our experiences, too, were about our environment, how to keep ourselves safe, and who we were in relation to the gang of children with us. But before I consider what Forest School is, it is worth taking some time to consider why and how the Forest School movement may have started up in this country. To do that, we need to go back in time and set the scene. This will help us to see where the attitudes and priorities of the Forest School leaders of today have come from.

Historical roots in the UK

Before the urbanisation of the nineteenth century it was not necessary to create formal links between education and the outdoor environment. Children spent large amounts of time outdoors as a part of normal life, and the skills and knowledge acquired there were life skills often related to the food economy or, for the privileged minority, leisure skills (Heywood, 2001: 123, 158). Education was a brief interlude for most, and a source of personal development for the rare few. But when industrialisation caused workers and their families to become crowded into urban tenements which soon became

slums, access to the countryside, to fresh air and to healthy exercise became the privilege of the middle and upper classes. Even among these middle- and upper-class families, the move to spend more time in the more crowded cities and large towns curtailed the opportunities for their children to be outdoors. It was this separation of the people from their natural environment, which started in the industrialisation of the nineteenth century, that drew the attention of educationalists and health professionals.

Pioneers such as Froebel and Pestalozzi had pointed out the importance of play in children's development (Pugh, 1996: 93), something that was difficult to achieve in overcrowded slums. In addition, Margaret McMillan and her sister Rachel (Cunningham, 2006: 184; Heywood, 2001: 28) saw what the effects were of a lack of fresh air and freedom of movement, not to mention the poorer diet, on the development of young children and they founded their outdoor nurseries in response. These were largely targeted at children from the poorer sectors of society, recognising the need for access to quality time to play and the need to be in the fresh air for the development of healthy minds and bodies.

At the other end of the social scale there also dawned a recognition that children were not as engaged with their environment as they once had been. In Cambridge, Susan Isaacs's school offered a nursery experience based on the outdoor environment to more privileged children. The Baden-Powell movement at the start of the twentieth century aimed to re-engage initially boys, and two years later girls too, with the outdoor environment; it also required a commitment to contribute to the welfare of others through a wide range of activities from fire-watching in the two world wars to washing cars for charity in the 1960s. Gordonstoun School was founded in 1934 by Dr Kurt Hahn, with the idea of using spartan training methods to develop emotional intelligence and social awareness. In 1941 Hahn launched the Outward Bound movement to address the moral decline of adolescence. So the links between outdoor experiences and healthy minds were recognised at an early date, if sometimes in idiosyncratic ways.

It is my perception that these were often a response to crises in society caused by industrialisation. In our period of history the current crises of obesity, behaviour problems and poor social skills are triggering new responses, and among them is Forest School. It would seem easier to effect change when a crisis can be demonstrated, rather than evolving slowly to avoid crises.

After the Second World War, the 1944 Education Act made access to education compulsory for most children up to the age of 14, rising to 15 in 1947. Eventually, 16 became the universal school leaving age, and what had hitherto been called PT (physical training) became PE (physical education). The PE syllabus included learning about a range of outdoor sports as well as participating in indoor gym sessions. Play-times were minimally supervised and provided opportunities for rushing about in the fresh air on playing fields as well as on hard surfaces. But in the last quarter of the twentieth century mainstream education in this country seemed to lose sight of the importance of regular outdoor opportunities, with a steady erosion of the time allocated to PE and the sale of playing fields to fund other developments. In addition, a seemingly endless succession of health and safety scares discouraged schools from participating in outdoor activities. This has not happened in other countries, and indeed in Scandinavia and other northern European countries Forest School-type activities have developed as a normal part of their early years provision.

In these other parts of Europe children do not start formal education as early as in the UK (Baldock et al., 2005: 31) and the 2008 interim report from the Primary Review team (Riggall and Sharp, 2008) indicated that they seem to reap benefits socially and emotionally without educational delays occurring. Many countries do, however, provide a range of services for most children below their chosen school starting age, and in Scandinavia these include opportunities that are very like our Forest School (Farstad, 2005: 14). I believe that it is time we reconsidered the needs of preschool children by examining why it is that those northern European countries consider it appropriate to give children time at a key age to develop socially and emotionally without the unnecessary pressure of academic achievement. That the brain of a 5-year-old is 90 per cent of its adult weight (Brierley, 1994: 27) is a strong indicator that the preschool years are important years for development. Maslow's hierarchy of needs illustrated many years ago (1954) that higher-order thinking is much easier when all other conditions have been met (Gross, 1996: 98), including social and emotional security. This book will lend evidence to the argument that Forest School can provide the opportunities for that secure social and emotional development.

From Scandinavia to Somerset

It was a trip to Denmark in 1993 by the early years department at Bridgwater College (see www.bridgwater.ac.uk/forestschool) that

started the development of Forest School in this country in the 1990s. What they saw in Denmark were groups of children playing outside in woodland:

The children set their own agenda, cook [on open fires], listen to storytelling, sing songs and explore at their own level. They are able to climb very high into the trees on rope ladders and swings, and sit and whittle sticks with knives, alone. (Trout, 2004: 16)

This way of working outside with young children was developed in Denmark in the 1950s, but it is not actually called Forest School. In Denmark there are skogsbørnehaven, naturbørnehaven and others. 'Børnehaven' is a translation of the German 'kindergarten', 'skog' means wood or forest, 'natur' is nature and the whole range of provision builds on a Scandinavian tradition of being close to nature. A similar approach is 'Skogsmulle' in Sweden, available to preschool children, and then 'Friluftsliv', which is a part of the national curriculum. Skogsmulle meets daily for three hours:

The children learn to walk, run, balance, climb, scramble and swing. They also learn about their environment and how to look after it through play, as well as how to respect each other's personal space. (Joyce, 2004: 4)

Norwegian Nature Kindergarten are similar, which is not surprising as 'Friluftsliv' was originally a Norwegian expression, and is entrenched in Norwegian culture. These Scandinavian traditions all adhere to the saying that 'There's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing' (Farstad, 2005: 14). As a kindergarten teacher in Norway in the 1970s, I can attest that the culture enshrines contact with and respect for the environment in all weathers. I have been outside at 15 °C with a class of 3- to 6-year-olds, all enjoying playing in the snow because they were dressed appropriately. The correct resources are crucial to the success of any project. We will return to this point in Chapter 7.

Bridgwater College staff and students returned inspired. They began to develop what we now know as Forest School, running Forest School sessions for their own college nursery children. At first they did not have access to a wood, and used the college playing field, but soon found a number of settings within a minibus ride of the college. Having developed a system for early years children, they then offered Forest School sessions to students with special needs at the college, and eventually it became part of the provision for other students in the college. There were benefits to the students' self-esteem, confidence and well-being, which are now being addressed in the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004), several years before that work was